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Want Ads Cent a Word.

A WOMAN'S ENCHANTMENT

By William Le Queux

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(Continued.)

"You see," he exclaimed, "I had honestly believed what Lydia had told me. But the whole plot had, I after ward discovered, really been formed to get rid of Marie Lebas in the most secret and mysterious manner possible. Lydia came back from Hastings next day, pretending to be appalled by what had happened, and suggested that she should remain unknown and unrecognized by entering the service of Madame Perrin as a shirt and collar dresser. I had no idea that the woman was married, or that her husband, the ex-professor, was one of the cleverest and most artistic criminals of modern times. I discovered his existence only a fortnight ago by watching her movements. His name is Pilade Branchini, and he—

"We know," cried Myra. "Mr. Ralston has already told us of him. He knew him in Vienna, and he was a professor of natural philosophy at the University of Bucharest."

"No," I responded, "I did not know that. I have always believed that he was professor of natural philosophy at the University of Bucharest."

"So he was. But he was also professor of history there," Garshore responded. "From exhaustive inquiries I have since made, I have, during the past fortnight, elicited several startling and amazing facts. Greclano died with exactly the same symptoms as poor Marie Lebas. I had believed him to be a master mind, and where chicanery and fraud were concerned, but compared with Pilade Branchini I am, as yet, a tyro."

"I hold certain incriminating documents which I found in your possession, Mr. Garshore," I said, in a hard, determined voice, "documents which show you yourself to be a poisoner!"

"Be patient," he urged, "and I will explain everything. Fearing treachery, the maid, Lebas, on the evening of her death posted a letter to me which I had not received until the following day. See! I have it here—in her own handwriting," he added, exhibiting it. "Read and you will see that she confesses to having in Vienna discovered Branchini in the act of making some mysterious distillation while her mistress was out. A week later she found upon his table some grayish powder in a small phial, and taking it up, was about to smell it, whereupon the man sprang forward in horror and blurted out that it was a compound that would be fatal if inhaled into the nostrils. Two days afterward there occurred the mysterious death of Prince Paul, accomplished, without a doubt, by the secret but potent poison which Branchini had been able to manufacture from the formula contained in certain ancient documents. A few years before, as he admitted to Lydia, he had discovered these by accident in the course of his paleographical studies in an old bookshop in a back street in Leghorn—parchments which at some time or another had evidently been abstracted from the state archives at Vienna. These had given into his unscrupulous hands an all-potent power—the secret of a poison impossible of detection."

"But the documents were in your possession," I repeated.

"I know," he answered. "That, too, I'll explain."

"But why was the life of Marie Lebas taken in that manner and suspicion thrown upon my friend Gough?"

"Ah! the ingenuity of that Italian, Branchini, was little short of demoniacal, and in his wife he had an apt and clever accomplice. It appears that the unfortunate Marie had only a few months ago related in confidence to her mistress what she actually knew concerning Branchini's crime in Vienna. Lydia at once told her to charge Mr. Gough with the murder, because there was already evidence of a heated quarrel. By this she saw that she might shield her husband. All went well. Information was given to Mr. Winch, and the warrant issued for the arrest, but suddenly Marie and the Italian quarreled—"

"The Italian!" I interrupted. "Was he short and stout, with a large flabby face?"

"I asked, recollecting this mysterious Italian I had seen meeting Lydia in Soho."

"Yes, that describes Branchini," was Garshore's response. "Well, the maid and the husband had a slight quarrel, and she threatened to leave Madame's service. Then it was that Branchini, living in hiding in London, and the master mind behind all the actions of the clever Lydia, continued the plot which had for its motive, the maid's mysterious death and silencing of her lips forever. Branchini and his wife were in alliance, and the only person they then feared was Marie—hence was the fatal powder placed within the smelling bottle which her mistress knew her to be so very fond of using. By this they not only got rid of what they thought was the only person who had knowledge that Branchini was so well versed in the science of toxicology, but also they placed still stronger suspicions upon Granny Gough."

"All this is utterly astounding," declared Granny. "I had no idea of the existence of such a plot against me. I only knew I was innocent of the death of Marie Lebas, and in the hope that some lucky clue might present itself in Soho," he said, turning to me, "I suggested you should go to Mme. Perrin, who is always a good friend to compatriots in trouble."

"Neither had I," said Garshore, "until, by watching Lydia, I unexpectedly discovered the secret existence of her husband. I found that he lived in a small flat in Rivermead Mansions, at the foot of Barnes bridge, and into the place one night during his absence

I succeeded in entering and discovering the actual parchment records from which he had prepared his deadly compound. It was these manuscripts which Mr. Ralston discovered in my possession on the very night that I, with the assistance of a friend who is a chemist, was trying to prepare some of the poison. You ask the reason I did this? Well, I will tell you. Earlier that evening I had received a surprise visit from the fair Lydia, who wanted my motor car to take her down to St. Albans. Upon my writing table there stood a silver bowl of roses, and after she had gone I by mere chance placed them upon the floor while I spread out upon the table a big map which I wanted to examine. Scarcely had I done so when my Irish terrier Tim entered the room, sniffed them inquisitively, and a few moments later rolled over upon the floor, dead. The woman knew how fond I am of roses and those flowers had been prepared for me! She and her precious husband had ascertained that I held the letter written to me by the unfortunate Marie Lebas just before her death, and had therefore resolved that I should die in the same secret manner, and so preserve their secret!"

"And what of this man Branchini?" I inquired of Garshore.

"He knows that I discovered these incriminating parchments in his rooms, that I hold the letter of Marie Lebas denouncing him, and that I have discovered their dastardly plot against myself. See!"

And he took from his pocket a copy of the day's newspaper and pointed to a brief paragraph, which stated that an unknown man, presumably a foreigner, had on the previous evening at Richmond station thrown himself beneath a train and been killed—a case of deliberate suicide.

"And Lydia?" Granny inquired.

"She's already abroad," was Garshore's answer. "Left London yesterday, I believe, in fear of our vengeance."

A few moments later Granny Gough and the man who had been his bitterest enemy were standing in friendly hand-grasp, while I was thanking the man Winch from the bottom of my heart.

There have been many happenings since that well remembered day at the State Hotel in York.

Garshore and Winch, both crooks, who feared to remain longer in England, having received our assurances of secrecy, crossed to Paris on the following day, and there still remain. By the concession given him by Soutzo the former is now rendered independent of the necessity of leading a dishonest life. As regards Winch I know but little.

Two months ago Granny and his little adopted daughter Gertie were walking with me along the King's road at Brighton, when a page boy came out of the Grand Hotel, where we were stopping, and handed my friend a telegram.

It was from Myra, to announce the tragic death of her father, who had been thrown from his horse and killed that morning while hunting with Lord Fiddleton's hounds. The direct result of his unfortunate circumstance was that Myra had inherited the greater part of Mr. Stapleton's fortune, and there is now no bar to Granny's marriage with the woman who reposed in him the most complete and unshaken confidence all through those black days of suspicion and despair. The dear old fellow still smokes his pet Bogdanoff incessantly, and still reads the philosophy of his constant companion, Friedrich Nietzsche.

The story of my own love you, of course, know—or at least you have already gathered it—a love that is blissful, peaceful, all-absorbing.

As my pen traces these final lines of a strange, eventful chapter of a lone wanderer's life story, a small soft hand has stolen into mine, while a pair of dark, unfathomable eyes, in which the passion of love is mirrored, are gazing into my own. She who stands at my side is Elfrida, my wife.

"Say that we are perfectly happy," she exclaims, a sweet smile of supreme contentment upon her lips, as one hand softly smooths my brow. "It is all-sufficient, dearest, that we love each other so fondly and so well," she adds. "The grim past is now dead and forgotten, and present is the sunshine of life, therefore say no more. Forgive everything, dearest, and only write—"

THE END.

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